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## THE FIGHTER

By ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE  
Author of "Caleb Coker, Railroadman," "Dr. Dale," "On Glory's Trail," etc.  
NEW YORK  
FRANK E. LOVELL COMPANY  
1909

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(Continued.)

"No York must be somewhere in a line with that biggest mountain over there to the south," he hazarded; glad to learn that the present was, for some reason, not one of those mysterious speechless occasions.

In the evening, as a rule, they went to the "open camp." There in the big three-sided shed with its evergreen-lined walls and its deep, blanket-covered floor of soft balsam boughs, a dozen or more people were wont to congregate by night. In front of the shed blazed a Homeric camp fire that tempered the mountain chilliness and made the whole place light as day. The young people—Desiree and Jack among them—usually spent the short evenings in singing and story telling. Caleb felt less at his ease here than anywhere else. For the young folk talked a language of youth that he did not understand. The stories he found somewhat mild, and the point of several of them he failed to catch. A sense of strangeness prevented him from joining in the songs. He had had no youth; save that which Desiree had imparted to him. He knew himself out of place among the care-free, jolly crowd. It made him feel ponderous, aged, taciturn. The easy laughter of youth only perplexed him. His sole joy during these open camp evenings was to lie in a shadowed corner of the "lean-to" and watch the bright play of Desiree's eyes as she heard her infectious laugh; to see how popular she was among the youngsters of her own age. So long as she did seek to ease his boredom by dragging him into the talk, he was well content to lie thus and drink the delight of her fresh loveliness. When she made him talk, he straightened up, came promptly shy, and managed to convey his sense of acute discomfort to everyone about him.

Altogether, the Adirondacks, for perhaps the first time since the "underland's" discovery, had found a visitor who did not speedily become a worshipper.

"Receive news!" announced Desiree, one evening as she met Caleb on her return from a conference with Mrs. Hawarden. "To-morrow's my birthday."

"Did you s'pose I'd forgot?" he asked in reproach. "There's two dates I manage to remember. One's your birthday. The other's the day you're comin' back to Granite."

"But that isn't the news," she went on. "It's only a running start to get you ready for it. Mrs. Hawarden is going to celebrate by the gorgeouslyst picnic you ever heard of."

"Last one we went on," began Caleb, "I burnt two of my fingers; and there was sand in the lemonade. But," he broke off just in time. "It'll be great to go on another. Where's it to be?"

"To Brown's Tract," said Mrs. Hawarden. "The inlet that twists around like a snake that's swallowed a cork. We're going to spend the night. Just think of that! All four of us. The guide is going up early in the morning to pitch the two tents and get everything ready. We're to be a tramping along at our leisure and get there about noon. Think! We're actually to camp overnight. I wish there were bears and mosquitoes; and there's thing to come not too near and growl dreadfully. I'm going to take Rex along if Mr. Bennett will let me. And isn't it a nice way to wind up your vacation? You'll have plenty of time. We'll be back here by noon next day, and your train doesn't go till night."

"Let's not talk about my going away," said Caleb. "I've been tickled to death to get back to the fight. But for the past two days I've been tryin' to frame up an excuse to myself that'll let me stay longer."

"Oh, why don't you? Why don't you?" she cried, all eagerness. "I stumped you to! Please stay!"

"Don't, little girl," he urged. "If I could stay with you an extra hour d'you s'pose I'd need to be begged to? It's a case of must. I got to be on deck day after to-morrow. There's a special session of the Legislature I was tellin' you about meets week after next. An' I've got to work like a dog till then to lick my crowd into line, an' frame up a stiff enough defence against your friend, Blacard. I'll be as busy as a one-armed paper-hanger that's got hives."

"But why?" she persisted. "You've been working away with both hands all your life. You're rich. What's the use of all that money if you can't have some fun?"

"I get my fun in the winnin'." Not in the holdin'.

"But you don't even know how to rest. And now, just as I'm teaching you, you run away. You could wait perfectly well, three weeks longer, and then go back to Granite with us. Just think what a time we'd have here! I'm very wise," she coaxed. "Won't you take my advice and stay?"

"I'd take it in a minute if I could, girl," he answered.

"Oh, dear! That means you won't. Advice is something everybody asks, everybody gives—as nobody takes. I wish you'd stay. This has been the beautifullest-happiest two weeks I ever spent."

"Easy it, honest, Dey?" he asked, his heavy face of a sudden alight. "Honest? It's been 'bout the only long stretch of happy time I c'n remember."

"Then why don't you stay?" she demanded. "Can't you see?"

He hesitated.

"I've a good mind to," he said at last.

She clasped her hands, then squeezed his arm as they swung down the hill together.

"Yes," he went on. "I believe I'll do it. It'd be fun to see what'd happen if I was to cut loose from work for once. An' you an' me could be together."

"Would you lose so very much?" she asked doubtfully, in belated concern.

"No more'n I could afford. Nowhere near so much as it's worth to have that extra time with you. My own Steeloid holdin's are pretty well covered. It won't be me that goes broke. I own my stock outright; an' before the winter's over I'll get the bill declared unconstitutional. That'll bring the price up again. I c'n afford to let up on Blacard for once. I'm dead sure to get him later on the same game, as well as on somethin' else."

"You say it won't be you who go broke," she interposed. "Will anyone? I mean if you don't go back day after to-morrow."

"Well," grinned Caleb. "If Blacard's bill passes, our Steeloid stock'll take a big tumble, of course. For those that owns it outright that'll be no great loss; 'cause it'll rocket again as soon as I sick one of my judges onto the bill's constitutionality. But the fellers I've tipped off to buy on margin d'you understand all this line of talk—those fellers are pluggin' pretty deep. I hear, an'—"

"Will they lose much?"

"Some of 'em are liable to be 'bout wiped out. I guess. The c'n'grs. Amel, Nicholas, Caine, Fr. Instance. An' old Reuben Standish. He'll go to pot

sure. An' Mr.—"

You mean they went into this on your advice, and if you aren't there to stand by them they will be ruined?"

"Just 'bout that, I guess. Don't blame me. They wasn't 'bliged to take my tip, an' I'm not responsible for 'em. Anyhow," they've made enough off me this year to—"

"You must go back," she declared. "I won't be very wrong. It just shows what harm a fluff-brained girl can do by poking her fingers into business she doesn't understand. Why, Caleb," she added, with a startled awe: "If you'd done as I asked, who knows how many families might have been made horribly poor? And it would all have been my fault!"

"But, Dey!" he protested. "You're all off. It's no affair of mine what that gold-shirt crowd put their cash on. I don't owe anything to 'em. An' if I c'n give you a good check by stayin' the whole bunch of 'em can hire a brass band an' march to the poor-house, for all I care. If you say 'stay,' I'll stay."

"I say you mustn't," she insisted. "And it was dear of you to be willing to go, for my sake. Anyway, I'll see you again in three weeks. That won't be so very long."

"No longer'n three years is generally grumbled Caleb; and the subject dropped.

They were on their way to the pretty waterside building that served the quadruple purpose of casino, store, post office, and bathhouse, for the Antlers. The arrival of the evening mail was one of the day's two great events; the other being the morning mail's advent. The night had a sting to its air; and the mail-time gathering was held in the lamplit store instead of on the porch or dock. A tall clerk was busy sorting letters and packages to eager groups of sweater-clad girls and men in cold-weather outing garb. Conover and Desiree, awaiting their turn, leaned against the glass cases opposite the post-office counter, and watched the laughing, excited guests.

"What I can't see," commented Caleb, "is why everybody's always in such a sweat about their mail. What is there in it for anyone? To every envelope that's got a check in it there's three that has bills; an' a dozen that's got advancemnts. To every letter that's worth readin' there's ten that's stupid or grouchy or makin' a hard luck touch. An' as for sovin' postals the only folks they interest is those that people come here to get away from the world they've been livin' in. Yet they scramble for newspapers an' letters from that same world, like they was stranded on a desert island. Here's our chance."

The crowd had thinned. Caleb and Desiree went forward to the mail counter. For Conover there were a sheaf of letters in business envelopes. He thrust them without a glance into the pocket of his tweed coat. Desiree's sole mail consisted of a long, pasted-board box thickly strawed with varicolored stamps and bearing the gold-lettered stamp of a New York florist. At last, a second hand clinked fingers with her. She tore away the wrappings. As the box was lifted, a whiff of warm fragrance rushed out, filling the room.

"Oh!" gasped Desiree, holding her face rapturously in a crimson heat of American Beauty roses.

Then, her cheeks aglow and her eyes shining, she lifted her head and faced Conover.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!" she exclaimed. "It was perfectly darling of you to remember my birthday. And I love 'em. And I love 'em. Beauties so. I might have known you would think of that. It's just like you. Smell them! What a dear, thoughtful, blessed old—"

She checked herself at sight of Conover's blank expression. If her own face had borrowed the flush of her armful of roses, Caleb had exacted similar tribute from a whole wagon-load of imaginary peonies.

"I'm—I'm sorry, Dey," he blurted out at last. "But they ain't from me. I—well, they must be from somebody who's got more sense. I didn't think to get you anything at all. I didn't even know what to give you for your birthday."

He stopped abruptly. For the fading of the happy light from Desiree's eyes had its usual effect of leaving him wordless and miserable.

"The girl, embarrassed, fell to turning the flowers over in their long box. She looked a little tired and her arrangement of the blossoms was perfunctory. A card was dislodged from among stems and fell to the floor, Caleb, picking it up, read Jack Hawarden's name. "I never mind, dear old boy!" she whispered, pressing close to his arm as they turned toward the Hawarden Cottage. "I'll make believe they're from you and that will be every bit as nice as if they really were. And you've done me more lovely things for me than everybody else put together. And I won't have you looking pathetic. Stop it! Now, smile! Oh, what a squint, weak sort of a smile! It's all right, I tell you. I know you'd have given me much lovelier roses than these if you'd thought."

"That's just it!" he growled bitterly. "I don't think. I never think. I guess you know I'd let 'em cut me up into city blocks if it'd make 'em hill on the way to Dey. But what good does that do? When it comes to bein' on hand with the million dinkie little stunts that women likes, I'm always a mile away, somewhere, 'honest! As corn, I wouldn't blame you if you—"

"Stop!" she cried, a break in her clear voice. "You shan't talk that way. Do you suppose all the presents in the world would have made me half as happy as having you here, this two weeks? Would any present have cost you one tenth the sacrifice of givin' up your work for my sake? And just now you offered to throw away thousands of dollars and wreck half a dozen of people's fortunes in order to please me by stayin' longer at the Antlers. What more could anyone do for me than you do?"

"I don't know," he answered simply. "But some day I may find out. An' when I do, why, I'll do it. You can gamble on that, you little girl."

CHAPTER XXI.  
Forest Madness.

It was late the next forenoon when the quartette, in two guide boats, set out from the Antlers dock for their twenty-four hour picnic to Brown's Tract Pond.

A guide had started an hour earlier with the camping equipment and pack. Back and forth Mrs. Hawarden and Caleb and Desiree and Caleb being delayed in starting by the vast pressure and vast quantities of candy that must be brought to bear on Rex before the cattle would consent to trust his cautious young life in their boat. When at last

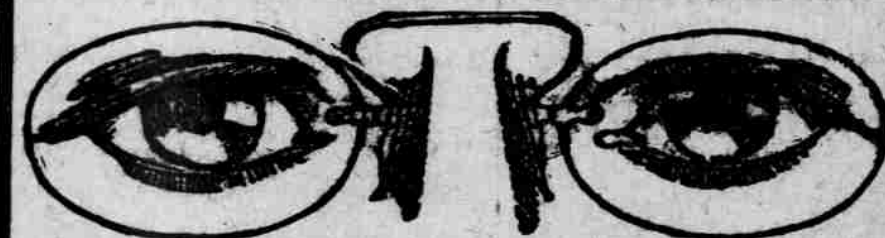
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